After Talking, Taping, Typing, 'Rebel Coach' Is Born

By THOMAS FOX

In 1947, during his debut year as head coach at the University of Mississippi, Johnny Vaught watched from the sidelines as his "Conerly-to-Poole" combination devastated Tennessee to the tune of 43-13.

A quarter-century later Vaught was on the sidelines for his last season, but between games he was tossing footballs out of the past. This time it was "author to editor tossing." Vaught was quarterbacking. William Sorrels, managing editor of this newspaper, was receiving.

The man who had led Ole Miss out of the football backwoods and into the record books as one of the winningest schools in college football was telling his story. It is a story that goes back to May 6, 1909, when John Howard Vaught was born on a ranch just outside Ingleside, Texas, but its focal point is Ole Miss football, the house that Vaught built.

A BOOK IS THE product of months of writing, rewriting, editing and mental searching for details buried in the fading memory of many years. The process that brought "Rebel Coach" from idea to reality is in many ways typical of the battle fought by all who have faced a typewriter or tape recorder with a book in mind.

And for anyone who has ever wondered about the "how" of publishing, the story behind the book is a wealth of information.

The groundwork was put down as far back as 1963 when Sorrels, then a reporter, interviewed Vaught over lunch at the Oxford Country Club. The result was an article that appeared in The Commercial Appeal. The two didn't meet again for seven years, but Sorrels kept a clipping from an article by Tom Siler of the Knoxville News-Sentinel that said Sorrels' article had told him more about Vaught than any thing he had read previously.

OLE MISS CONTINUED winning football games and Vaught established himself as the dean of Southeastern Conference coaches — 24 seasons as a head coach. By the end of the 1969 season it seemed to some that the time had come for a book by or about Vaught. His 25th year was coming up and it promised to be one of his best. Archie Manning, the latest in a string of Ole Miss standout quarterbacks would be back for his senior year.

Sorrels, feeling that the Vaught story should be told, discussed the idea for a book with Kyle Griffin, sports editor of The Commercial Appeal. As a feeler he asked the coach by letter if he had considered a book about his years at Oxford. Vaught replied in a brief letter and said he would like to "talk with you sometime when it is convenient for us to get together." A verbal agreement was reached in early January, 1970, when Griffin and Vaught met at the winter SEC meeting in Tampa, Fla.

WEEKLY TAPING sessions in Vaught's Oxford office began Feb. 15. Griffin, Sorrels and Vaught would huddle around a recorder with Sorrels asking questions and the coach doing most of the talking. Several times the meetings adjourned to the nearby "war room" where Vaught diagramed his sprint-out brand of football on the blackboard.

Coaches across the country would have traded their quarterbacks for a seat at one of those meetings.

Rather than be Vaught's Boswell, Sorrels let the coach tell his own story on the tapes and by replaying them, he got the flavor and feel of the man's speech and style. After a session, Sorrels would return to Memphis, type out the material, edit it and send it back to Vaught for more editing.

AS THE CHAPTERS began to take shape, the real work began. No one can sit down and reel off with complete accuracy everything that happened during a lifetime. Every story, every recollection of every game had to be checked and rechecked against the record books and others who were there. Old teammates and friends who had known Vaught since childhood were called upon to contribute their versions of stories that would go into the book.

During high school days in Fort Worth a young quarterback called on Vaught to carry the ball on four straight plays. Vaught, as the team captain warned him not to repeat the play. But the play was called for again. With that, Vaught stepped back and kicked the unsuspecting quarterback in the rear.

Jack Newell, now an industrialist in Fort Worth, volunteered help on that story and others about Vaught and his high school days.

Interviews, some in Memphis, but most in Oxford, continued into the spring and by April 27 Sorrels was able to write: "I researched nearly every area we plan to cover and the story shapes up nicely."

NEVER KNOWN, at least to the press, as the talkative type, Vaught, an honor student both in high school and college, unfolded his story in clean, spare language. Chapters were kept short deliberately. Some are only four pages long, but they are direct. With so many bowl games to his credit (18) Vaught had room to ramble about post-season glory. But chapter 18 "On Going Bowling" covers only four pages. "We didn't want just a rehash of a lot of games."

Chapters did not fall into place from beginning to end like dominoes. The first to be roughed out was Chapter 12 "The Upset Of The Year" which covers Vaught's sixth year at Ole Miss when the Rebels surprised Maryland 21-14 and accepted that first bid to the Sugar Bowl.

The last and first chapters were finished at about the same time. Some chapter titles in the original planning simply disappeared. Others were combined and given new titles. Vaught was in the Navy during World War II and nautical terms are sprinkled through the chapter titles: "The Cloudbusters," "We Swim With A Fish," and "The Tide Turns."

WITH EVERY BOOK that is either "told to" someone, ghost written or handled by an editor there is always room for doubt in the reader's mind or just how much of the finished product came from the author.

In describing the Ole Miss campus the morning after the riot of Sept. 30, 1962 in which two persons were killed, Vaught said on tape: "I looked around the campus and you have never seen such a torn up area in your life ... I'll bet you right around the Lyceum Building there were ... well there is no way of estimating, but it looked to me like 5,000 cans of that tear gas had been used. It looked absolutely a dump, a trash dump. It was the worst looking thing you ever saw."

In the book, the paragraph reads: "...I went up around the Student Union Building and the Lyceum. I have never seen such a sight in my life — nothing like it. Right around the Lyceum there were — well, there is no way of estimating, but it looked to me like 5,000 cans of tear gas had been used. The campus resembled a trash dump. It was the worst thing I ever saw. It didn't look like a college campus at all."

DURING THE SUMMER of 1970, with the manuscript beginning to take solid shape, the search for a publisher began. It was a difficult time to go asking.

The publishing industry was on hard times with some companies trimming payrolls and cutting back on the number of new titles. Others were reluctant to tackle a sports book which would have regional appeal.

"We are sorry to say ... that we do not feel that it would suit the present requirements of the Dutton list," said the rejection letter from E. P. Dutton.

"Unfortunately, our list is now filled for a long period in the future and we are unable to consider Mr. Vaught's manuscript at this time," is the way A. S. Barnes and Company replied.

The 1970 season got underway without a commitment

VAUGHT HAD begun keeping his first diary on Jan. 2, 1970, the day after the Rebels upset Arkansas in the Sugar Bowl. Many of the entries include thoughts about Manning and the growing publicity over the coming season.

His advice to Manning on January 10 was to not get cornered by any newspapermen and "to get a damn haircut."

The ultimate dream was for this to be the year to crown Vaught's career. If every turn was for the best, "Diary of a Season" would be the first chapter in the book.

As the season got underway Vaught was jotting down Friday thoughts, mailing them to Sorrels and following up Sunday with after-game comments.

THE DREAM SEASON began to crumble Oct. 17 when Southern Mississippi rolled over the Rebels 30-14 on the new Astroturf of Hemingway Stadium.

"I am hurt and embarrassed," began Vaught's last entry in the diary.

The dream collapsed in the following weeks with the appearance of Vaught's heart ailment, Manning's broken left arm and losses to Mississippi State, LSU and to Auburn in the Gator Bowl.

And editing of the book came to a standstill as Sorrels entered the hospital for surgery during Thanksgiving week.

BEFORE GOING TO the hospital, Sorrels offered the manuscript to James Simmons, director of the Memphis State University Press. Simmons, a quiet Hoosier, admits he was skeptical at first, but part of his skepticism was swept away when he attended the Ole Miss-Houston game. He had never before been expanded to such enthusiasm for a football team.

Early in 1971 Simmons received approval from the MSU Press editorial board to publish the yet unnamed book.

A contract with Vaught was signed in April and the restructured manuscript was delivered in May. But the delivery of the manuscript didn't mean the book was completed. Additional changes in the first chapter, now "Mississippi Mystique," were made. And the constant checking of facts was taken up by Simmons' editorial assistants.

AT LEAST 10 titles had been considered before Sorrels suggested "Rebel Coach" and Simmons added "My Football Family."

Type for the book was set in Memphis and the binding was by Kingsport Press of Kingsport, Tenn.

The book was designed by Simmons who chose a glossy magazine-type paper because of the many drawings and photographs.

Rebel Coach John Vaught and William Sorrels

A sports book may seem light fare for university presses which usually stick to publications of a more academic nature, but MSU was not breaking new ground. "Fighting Tigers" by LSU Press had sold well.

A FIRST PRINTING of 10,000 was by far the largest in the 10-book history of MSU Press. And even before the book went on sale yesterday, the day of the Ole Miss-Memphis State game in Memorial Stadium, the figure turned out to be a conservative one.

A second printing has been ordered, says Simmons, who admits he has had "a very busy few months" since work began on the Vaught manuscript. The second edition will contain minor corrections and changes not in the first.

BUT FOR AUTHOR and editor, the real work is over. The book with its 232 pages wrapped in a dust jacket of the Rebel red and blue is on the shelves and the manuscript has been returned to Vaught.

For Sorrels there is the satisfaction of knowing the Vaught story has been told and was told at just the right time. There were elements of fun throughout the 18 months, but the real education was that the writing of a book is more work than anything else.

"When Coach Vaught and I got through reading and rereading we were both sick of it. But proud too."